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From Your Commissioner...

Food Safety Storm Hits Washington

Recalls, illnesses and deaths linked to salmonella-contaminated peanut products from Peanut Corporation of America have spawned a political backlash that will likely result in changes to the nation's food safety system. Because the low-cost, processed peanut products were used in nearly 3,500 processed food products, the recalls were unprecedented and expensive for manufacturers.

Kellogg, for example, reported \$70 million in losses due to massive recalls of more than seven million cases of cookies and crackers. Kellogg's CEO joined the chorus of consumer advocates and elected representatives of all stripes, including President Obama, in calling for drastic overhaul of the food safety system. A slew of food safety bills have been introduced.

No one can be against food safety and protection of public health. But when it comes to regulatory solutions, the devil is in the details. One bill, H.R. 875, sponsored by Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), would create a separate Food Safety Administration, and has sparked an internet firestorm of fears of impacts on small and organic farms. Some have even charged that H.R. 875 would outlaw home gardening.

These fears and charges appear greatly exaggerated, in some cases downright fictitious. The Cornucopia Institute, a Wisconsin-based watchdog and advocacy for organic and small and medium-scale family farms, has studied the array of bills and declared, "none of these bills would 'outlaw organic farming.'" Cornucopia and other observers believe the vaguely written H.R. 875 is unlikely to be the bill that emerges from the pack.

H.R. 759, authored by John Dingell (D-MI), may have more push behind it in the House. It would have all food processing facilities register with FDA and pay annual fees, evaluate and implement preventive controls of hazards, monitor these controls and keep extensive records. It would require safety plans for production and harvest of fruits and vegetables, and expand traceability, including farms and restaurants.

Consumers Union says it supports several of the bills, and is urging consumers to write their senators in support of S. 510, the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act of 2009. Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH) is a lead sponsor of this bill, which would require HACCP plans, third-party certification of labs, stricter scrutiny of imported foods, beefed-up FDA inspections and food-borne illness surveillance systems, greater traceability, and mandatory recalls. The similar H.R. 1332 has House Ag Committee Chair Collin Peterson (D-MN) as co-sponsor.

This is just a sampling of the bevy of food safety bills that will bear close attention throughout the legislative process. Efforts to tighten regulations often end up hurting smaller scale farms and processors more than the big outfits. Supermarket chains are notifying growers that they will require USDA's GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certification of all suppliers. The standards are onerous for smaller operations, and penalize diversified farms or even farms that are near livestock farms.

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An informational meeting in Kingston on raising chickens hosted by Dodge's Agway and Poulin Feeds drew a crowd of 130 people last Wednesday evening. Keith Webster, owner and president of Dodge's Agway, and John Dodge, his father-in-law and founder of the company which has stores in Hampton Falls, Plaistow and Exeter, were bowled over by the turnout. Dodge, a poultry fancier who once worked at the UNH poultry research farm, told how to care for chicks and provide a healthy and secure home for poultry. He even makes house calls to help customers with their flocks.

Dodge estimates about 60% of attendees own poultry, and 40% are interested in getting started. They were mobbed with customers Saturday, their first chick delivery day. "It's something you can do in suburbia," he says. "The costs are not prohibitive, and the kids can even make a little money at it." Dodge told tales of Rockingham County's poultry heyday to the crowd in Kingston. Back in the 1940s to 1950s chickens were king in New Hampshire agriculture, and Rockingham was top county in the United States for breeder chickens.

Lorraine Merrill, Commissioner